



Date : 08/07/2008

Sharing traditional knowledge and cultures of different tribes of West Bengal, India

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Meeting: 138 Knowledge Management
Simultaneous Interpretation: English, Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian and Spanish

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 74TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
10-14 August 2008, Québec, Canada
<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla74/index.htm>

Abstract

The state of West Bengal in India has a multi-cultural and multi-lingual population including about 40 tribes. Mainly due to economic pressures the original cultural heritage is eroding. Most of the knowledge is not available in written form as it was traditionally handed down orally. So preserving and sharing the traditional knowledge and culture of these tribes is important to foster understanding and harmony. Libraries, NGOs, research institutes and government bodies in West Bengal are working in this direction. Here we discuss the current knowledge management initiatives that are being undertaken and the role of libraries and librarians. We also give some suggestions on how to co-ordinate these efforts for greater synergy and effectiveness.

Background

Background

- India population – 1130 million
 - Literacy rate – 65.4%
 - Tribal population – 8.2%
 - Tribal literacy rate – 47%
- West Bengal population – 87 million
 - Literacy rate – 69.2%
 - Tribal population – 5.5%
 - Tribal literacy rate – 43%

India has a population of 1130 million of which the total “scheduled tribe” (ST) population is 8.20% [24, 23]. The Constitution of India provides certain safeguards for tribals and the government of India grants several concessions, reservations, aids, etc. for them. So for administrative reasons the recognized tribes in India are listed as scheduled tribes. The literacy rate of ST population in India is 47.1:%. West Bengal is a state of India with a population of 87 million [21]. The scheduled tribe population is 5.5% of the total population of West Bengal. The literacy rate of scheduled tribes in West Bengal is 43% [23].

Cultural diversity in West Bengal



Cultural diversity in West Bengal

- About 40 tribes in West Bengal
- Population < 1000 – 4 tribes
- 1000 < 5000 – 9 tribes
- 5000 < 10000 – 5 tribes
- Cultures under threat of extinction

West Bengal may be divided into the following three cultural zones:

North Bengal consisting of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Dinajpur and Malda districts.

Radh Bengal- i.e. the plateau areas of Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia, parts of Medinipur, Burdwan, Hooghly and Murshidabad districts.

South Bengal---Howrah, Calcutta (now Kolkata), South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Nadia, parts of Hooghly, Burdwan, Medinipur and Murshidabad districts covered by the Gangetic plains [19].

Lepcha, Bhutia, Sherpa are local inhabitants of North Bengal. The Terai area tea estates of North Bengal consist of tribal immigrants like Munda, Oraon, Santal, Nagasia, Asur, Birjia, Kisan and Ho from the state of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa. Other tribes like Rabha, Mech, Toto, Garo are also found in North Bengal.

In Radh Bengal tribal communities like Munda, Santal, Kora, Birhor, Mahali, Lodha, Pahariya, Kharia, Savara are found.

There are about 40 tribes in West Bengal. It is seen that there are 4 tribes with a population less than 1000. There are 9 tribes with population between 1000 to 5000 and 5 tribes with population between 5000 to 10000 [6]. All these 40 tribes have their distinct cultures. But because of various factors like effect of globalization, mass media, increase of opportunities in the job market as a result of various development plans and policies taken up by government, a trend in shifting the homeland is visible. This is affecting the original traditional culture. Most of the festivals were celebrated with traditional dance, song and music with different types of musical instruments. These festivals used to be

very colourful. Their heritage needs to be preserved and shared with others. Government of India as well as state governments through their various institutions and programmes organize various folk cultural festivals like dance festivals, etc where all the tribal communities from various states get an opportunity to present their cultural heritage sharing a common stage.

Earlier, the professionals like Kathaks and Vachaks used to carry the information regarding folk traditions to different corners of the country and to spread it orally in important places like temples or other public places organized by the communities. But due to the socio-economic pressures and development of various mass media these professionals are rarely seen nowadays. Gambhira dance of North Bengal, chhau dance of Purulia, 'Bhatiyali' - the song of the boatmen and Baul song were very popular at one time. These traditional cultures used to be transferred from Guru (Teacher) to Shishya (Disciple) orally. Number of Research institutions, government departments, non-government organizations (NGOs) are trying to preserve various tribal festivals and cultures by documenting and preparing various print and non-print media.[4]

Major linguistic groups



Major linguistic groups of tribes in West Bengal

- Austro-Asiatic (Santal, Munda,)
- Dravidian (Oraon, Malpaharia, ...)
- Tibeto-Chinese (Bhutia, Lepcha, ...)
- Assam-Burmese (Chakma, Magh, ...)

The population belongs to 4 major linguistic groups which are Austro-Asiatic (Santal, Munda, Mahali, Bhumij, Lodha, Kora, Ho, etc); Dravidian (Oraon, Malpaharia, etc.); Tibeto-Chinese (Bhutia, Lepcha, Toto, Mech, Garo, Rabha, etc.) and Indo-Aryan (Bengali, etc.) [19]. Their ethnic composition is varied. They still maintain their traditional culture. Of course several transformations are visible with the influence of surrounding Hindu tradition and infiltration of various cultures. These cultural exchanges are evidenced in festivals and fairs. Similarly, the Hindu traditional culture surrounding

the tribal life shows the evidence of cultural exchanges especially in the sphere of festivals. Scheduled tribes prefer to live in contiguous areas with their own religious belief, customs and rituals. Mainly they are worshippers of nature. The tribal communities have their own traditional caste bound occupations. Number of projects are being undertaken to document their life, customs and rituals, festivals, indigenous knowledge including ethno-medicine, their occupation – crafts and craftsmanship.

Knowledge management initiatives - areas



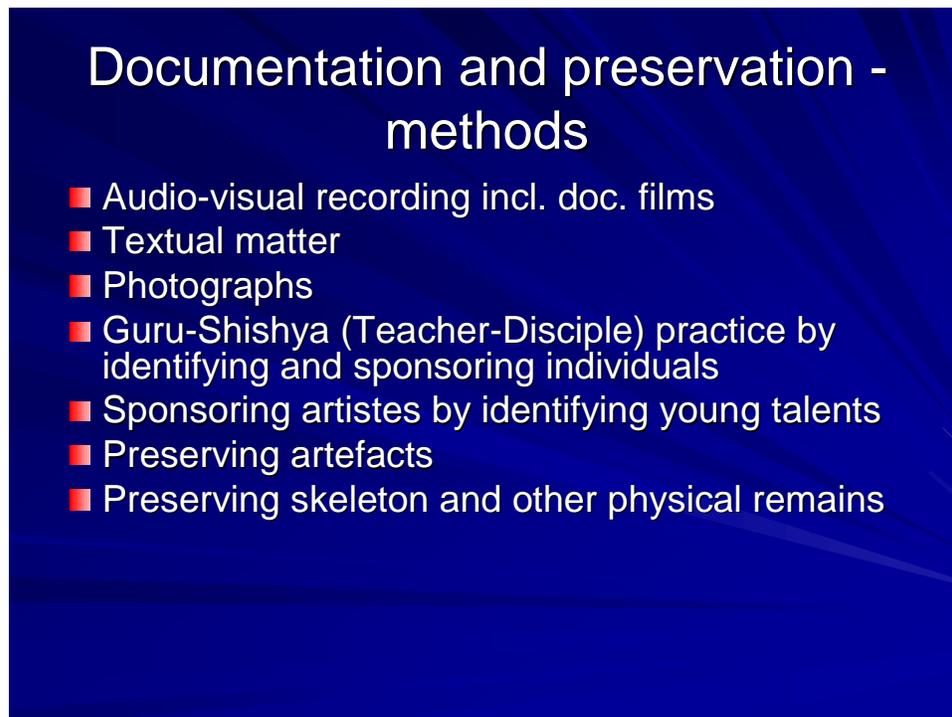
Knowledge management initiatives in West Bengal are covering the following broad areas of tribal life and culture:

- Folk art, music, dance, etc.
- Crafts and craftsmanship
- Traditional wisdom and indigenous knowledge
- Physical anthropological aspects

Fieldwork is being undertaken to document traditional knowledge and wisdom, skill, folk tradition, folk art, folk music and performances, which are gradually eroding. The study of traditional knowledge based on the use of local natural resources will also help in natural resource management. These documentations will help to study the relevance of such cultural activities in today's society. Different crafts and craftsmanship from various parts of the country are also being studied. Research Institutions/ Organizations (like Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) are undertaking anthropological investigations to give a new dimension to biocultural study of human population. Research programmes like 'Syncretism in India: a multidisciplinary study' throws light on blending of heterogeneous practices as a result of diversified cultural interactions. Studies are carried

out among multiethnic communities. For example, At Sunderban, located in the coastal area of West Bengal, there is a multiethnic population and they practice common rituals. Number of organization under government of West Bengal like Cultural Research Institute (CRI), is also doing the fieldwork to preserve and manage the cultural heritage, traditional wisdom of tribal communities of West Bengal. A number of survey works have been undertaken by various Universities, Research Institutions, government departments and NGOs to document the folk traditional culture, crafts and indigenous wisdom.

Documentation and preservation - methods



Documentation and preservation - methods

- Audio-visual recording incl. doc. films
- Textual matter
- Photographs
- Guru-Shishya (Teacher-Disciple) practice by identifying and sponsoring individuals
- Sponsoring artistes by identifying young talents
- Preserving artefacts
- Preserving skeleton and other physical remains

The various methods of documenting and preserving tribal culture and knowledge can be broadly classified as follows:

- Audio-visual recording including documentary films
- Textual matter
- Photographs
- Guru-Shishya (Teacher-Disciple) practice by identifying and sponsoring individuals in the roles of teachers and disciples
- Sponsoring artistes by identifying young talents
- Preserving artefacts
- Preserving skeleton and other skeletal remains

Several printed textual documents are coming up as a result of field survey undertaken by different educational, research, government organizations and NGOs. A multi-volume work like People of India has been completed by ASI. Number of photo albums,

documentary films, audio and video cassettes on tribal people (like Santal marriage, fishermen of Fraserganj, the Bhumijis, etc) are being prepared by government organizations, research institutions and NGOs.

Zonal Cultural Centres (ZCC) are also doing documentation work of different folk art and tribal art especially those which are very rare and almost on the verge of extinction. Some organizations (like ZCC, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Lalit Kala Akademi, etc) are also promoting new young talents in performing and visual arts. Under one of the schemes masters (Guru) are identified in each zone and pupils (Shishyas) are assigned to them. Scholarships are also offered. Under some of the schemes young talents are being identified and sponsored.

Some organizations (like ASI) as well as anthropological sections of museums are maintaining repository of skeletal remains.

Besides, Scheduled Castes and Tribes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal; Lokasanskriti Gabeshana Parishad (Research Institute of Folk Culture, West Bengal); and Loksanskriti o Adibasi Sanskriti Kendra (Folk Culture and Tribal Culture Centre), Information and Culture Department, Government of West Bengal are bringing out books, articles, audio/video cassettes/CDs on various real life aspects of tribal communities like folk medicine, witchcraft, Bauls, folk deity, Jhumur, chhou dance of Purulia etc.

Documentation and preservation - repositories



**Documentation and preservation -
repositories**

- Libraries
 - Digital Libraries
- Archives
- Museums
- Research Centres
 - Govt. departments, Universities, NGOs
 - Data Banks

The above documentation of tribal knowledge and culture are available in the following repositories:

- Libraries
- Digital Libraries
- Archives
- Museums
- Research Centres
- Govt. departments, Universities, NGOs
- Data Banks

Libraries of all the organizations which are playing important roles in documenting the tribal culture and wisdom are the main store house of tribal culture and knowledge. Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) is a project between Council of Scientific and Industrial Research(CSIR), the Ministry of Science and Technology and Department of Ayurveda, etc, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to control patents based on traditional knowledge[11].

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) is setting up a databank on Arts, Humanities and cultural heritage of the country. It is keeping documented materials in paper, audio/video materials slides, photographs, etc.

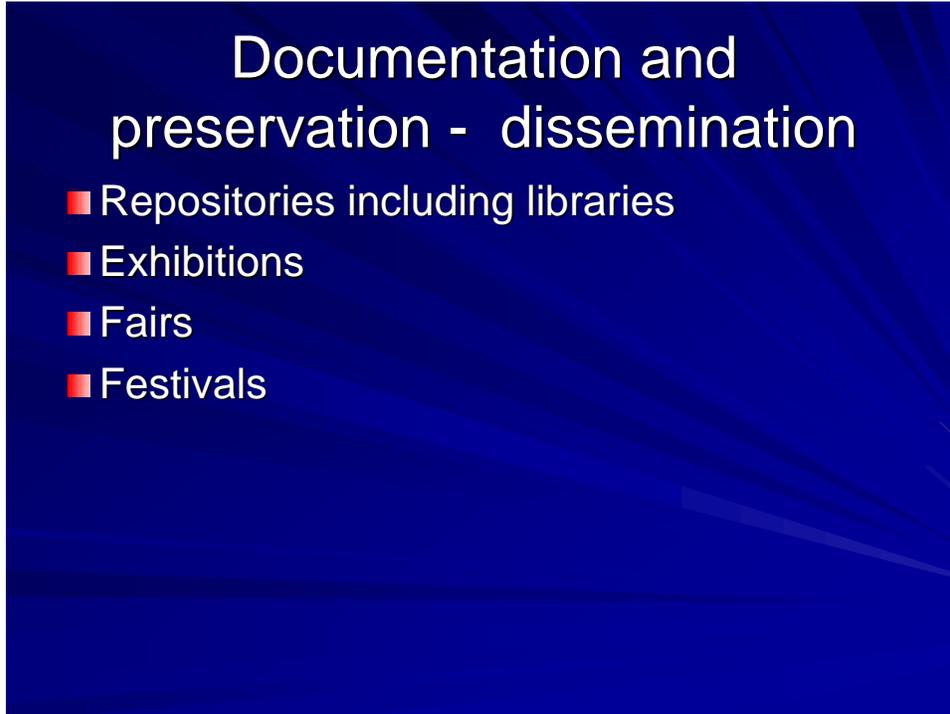
The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) is setup to preserve minority cultures and to revive traditional art and crafts by developing crafts centres and organizing heritage festivals.

ASI is also maintaining a basic data archive collecting data from their researchers under various projects on cultural & physical anthropology and allied disciplines. ASI has also set up ethnographic museums at each of its regional and sub regional centres. ASI is also maintaining a skeletal repository of collections from Harappa, Mahen-jo-doro, etc.

Artefacts, photographs, audio and video cassettes of folk music and song kept in the ethnographic museums of CRI, under government of West Bengal are also throwing light on the lifestyle, culture of indigenous people. These museums are keeping objects like hunting tools, fishing equipments, dresses, ornaments, utensils, furniture, spinning and weaving aids of the tribal communities. It is also keeping photographs, tape records of folk music, folk songs sung for various religious and cultural occasions.

Different departments of various Universities like Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta, is also engaged in carrying out research work and in preserving the tribal culture. This Department has already set up a museum to project the life style of these tribal people, arts, artefacts etc. Library and Information Science Departments of University of Calcutta, Jadavpur University, Vidyasagar University are also doing studies to find out the information seeking behaviour of various tribal communities of West Bengal.

Documentation and preservation - dissemination



The dissemination of the traditional knowledge and culture of the tribal people in West Bengal is being done in several ways. They are through:

- Repositories including libraries
- Exhibitions
- Fairs
- Festivals

West Bengal has a well-developed public library system consisting of about 2800 government aided and government sponsored libraries and Community Library cum Information Centers (CLICs). Besides these there are about 2200 other non-government and non-sponsored libraries but registered libraries in the state [22, 3]. Many of these public libraries are actively conducting local area surveys and maintaining local history collections including the cultural heritage of local tribes.

36 village libraries are functioning under Rural Extension Centre, Institute of Rural Reconstruction (Palli Samgahana Bibhaga), Visva-Bharati. These are acting as village community centres, continuing education centres for neo literates, etc. [17]. These libraries maintain separate collections for neo literates, tribal communities and keep close contacts with local people even with non members. Rural development was always a focus area of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. When Tagore established Visva-Bharati University he planned for the development of surrounding rural areas. Now in the changed condition Tagore's visions are being reconstructed by Visva-Bharati with the assistance from Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF).

Besides the public libraries, the libraries of the research institutions and government organizations and NGOs are actively participating in disseminating the knowledge regarding the tribal people.

Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT) is also working with the objective of preserving and reviving various Indian art and culture by conducting programmes in different parts of the country.

Zonal Cultural Centres (ZCC) have been set up in various parts of the country to promote, preserve and disseminate regional cultural identity. Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre located in Salt Lake, Kolkata is also engaged in carrying out the task to project zonal cultural identity and thus the rich cultural diversity of India. It is organizing crafts fairs where number of master craftsmen and artists take part to exhibit and to show the process of manufacturing to the customers. ZCC is also providing marketing facilities to various craftsmen through shilpgrams.

As a part of the National Cultural Exchange Programme exchange of artists, performers are taking place between various regions of India. Thus it is helping in the promotion of different tribal art forms in different corners of the country.

West Bengal and other neighbouring states like Orissa are also organizing tribal cultural festivals where various troupes across the states come and show their respective cultural event sharing a common stage. This helps to share their cultural heritage and pave the way for unity in diversity.

Lalit Kala Akademi is also doing research and documentation work on visual arts and organizes exhibitions on visual traditional art forms.

Sangeet Natak Akademi, an autonomous body under Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Government of India is responsible for maintaining cultural contacts between various regions in India and between India and other countries. It has taken up projects on chhou dance of West Bengal. It also promotes advanced study and training in different types of traditional dance and music which are very rare. It also provides financial assistance to different cultural institutions and offers fellowships.

Major Organizations in West Bengal

Major Organizations in West Bengal

- Anthropological Survey of India
- Asiatic Society
- Cultural Research Institute
- Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre
- Lokasanskriti O Adibasi Sanskriti Kendra

...contd.

Many organizations and institutes are taking active part in the knowledge management efforts in West Bengal to document, preserve and disseminate the traditional cultures of the tribal communities. The major ones as revealed from the above discussions are:

- Anthropological Survey of India
- Asiatic Society
- Cultural Research Institute
- Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre
- Lokasanskriti O Adibasi Sanskriti Kendra
- Public libraries
- Institute of Rural Reconstruction, Visva-Bharati, Sriniketan and Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation with 36 village libraries
- Indian Statistical Institute
- Research Institute of Folk Culture

Asiatic Society (established in 1784) started their research to study the various tribes and castes. Anthropological Society of India (ASI) under Department of Culture, Ministry of Tourism and Culture has developed seven Regional and Sub-regional Centres to study the cultural diversities. A number of documentation works has been completed and some others have been taken up by ASI and its regional and sub-regional centres to preserve the rich cultural heritage of tribal people. Ethnographic museums have come up with each of its regional centres. Cultural Research Institute, Government of West Bengal is set up with a view to study tribal life and culture, to preserve these and to develop plans and policies to help in the improvement of their socio-economic conditions. They have also

developed an ethnographic museum. Zonal Cultural Centres (ZCC) have been established in different corners of the country to make people aware of local cultures and to promote, preserve and disseminate culture throughout the country. Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre(EZCC), located at Salt Lake City, Kolkata, is also contributing significantly in promoting, preserving and disseminating local, regional folk art and folk culture and thus to show the cultural linkages across the territorial boundaries. Loksanskriti o Adibasi Sanskriti Kendra under Information and Culture Department of Government of West Bengal is also playing a very important role in preserving the art and culture of various tribes of West Bengal.

Major Organizations in West Bengal

- Public libraries
- Institute of Rural Reconstruction, Visva-Bharati, Sriniketan and Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation with 36 village libraries
- Indian Statistical Institute
- Research Institute of Folk Culture

Public libraries are trying to collect history of local areas and to document the important traits and cultural activities of the target population. In this way they are playing important roles in keeping documents, in both textual and non-textual media, and disseminating the recorded knowledge as and when they are needed by the users. A good number of village libraries in Sriniketan with the assistance from RRRLF are working as village community centres to help in the development of the socio-cultural activities of those areas and to support the local communities. Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation was established in 1972 to support the public library services in India. It is extending financial assistance to promote library services in the country.

Indian Statistical Institute established by Prof. Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis has Sociological Research and Anthropological Research Units. They are taking up project works to do field work in different tribal areas and document their findings. Research Institute of Folk Culture (Loksanskriti Gabeshana Parishad), an NGO, is also taking up

various activities to document traditional art, folk music, folk dance, folk lore, folk medicine etc.

Further Initiatives

Further Initiatives for libraries

- Collection development in regional languages
- Translation
- Organizing Exhibitions, Fairs, Festivals
- Providing platform for multi-cultural exchange programme
- Educational programmes on TV, Radio
- Recording of live programmes
- Extend current promotional activities

Now we need to involve more public libraries to enhance their services to act as outreach centres, to take the services to the unserved. The public libraries especially the rural libraries should collect the basic demographic data relating to the target population they are supposed to serve - their culture, lifestyle, livelihood and try to document this with a view to project the tribal culture of the locality. Collection development in regional languages is a need of the day. Librarians should encourage local people to write in regional languages. Audio/video cassettes can be prepared and kept in the local libraries. Translation of local writing is needed to exchange diverse cultures. Similarly translation from other languages to local language is also necessary for understanding other cultures. Libraries should provide a platform for organizing exhibitions, fairs and festivals where local culture, crafts and art can be exhibited. The physical network of public libraries should be used to organize multi-cultural programmes so that various communities across the local barriers can share one platform and can build up unity in diversity. Local libraries along with other research institutes and NGOs can visit the tribal areas and take part in recording the live programmes. Thus these libraries can extend the current promotional activities.

Conclusion

Conclusion - I

- Impact of previous programmes have had tangible benefit on population
 - The literacy rate of the tribal population increased from 28% to 43% in 10 years
 - People, including tribal, are now more conscious of their own and other folk cultures
 - Work participation rate of the tribal population has also marginally increased

Conclusion - II

- Public libraries involvement should increase to carry this effort to all sections
- These would enable libraries to become active agents for spreading cultural knowledge and harmony

We find that the results of these knowledge management initiatives, the majority of which were undertaken over the last two decades, have had a tangible beneficial impact. For instance the literacy rate of the tribal population in West Bengal has gone up from

27.8% in 1991 to 43.4% in 2001, although it is still lower than the state average of 68.6%. Similarly their work participation rate has also increased from 47.7% in 1991 to 48.8% in 2001. However it may be noted that their work participation rate of 48.8% is higher than that of the entire state of West Bengal, which is 36.8% [23]. The Government policies of concessions, reservations and aids have had a beneficial impact on these rates also. These policies are helping the knowledge management initiatives indirectly by making education and jobs more accessible to them and this enables them to increase their confidence, take pride in their own culture and help others to preserve their indigenous knowledge.

We have already discussed how a large number of Government (both national and state) organizations, research institutes, libraries and NGOs are preserving and disseminating traditional cultures and knowledge. However their ability to reach the masses is limited. The public library system in West Bengal has about 5000 libraries. These are spread over the entire state and also cover the majority of the rural areas. This public library system can effectively co-ordinate all the knowledge management initiatives in the state by helping in preserving traditional knowledge in areas not reached by other organizations, organizing a central collection of all the documents created (including audio-visual materials) and disseminating through its large physical network with resource sharing. They can also organize local exhibitions, fairs and festivals to encourage local cultures, spread awareness and foster harmony in the state's multi-cultural and multi-lingual society.

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